a. The Third Meditation's argument for God's existence

The Idea of God – being with all perfections (this idea has greatest objective reality of all)

Therefore, this idea of God has the greatest objective reality of all as an idea.

STEP 1: Descartes acknowledges God is the "most perfect being" (i.e., God)? He begins by reflecting that he has an idea of God — "by the name God I understand a substance infinite, [eternal, immutable], independent, all-knowing, all-powerful, and creator of me and everything else."

STEP 2: The "causal adequacy principle" (or the principle that the cause must contain at least as much reality as the effect).

STEP 3: He argues: the idea of God has a great deal of "objective reality" (i.e., the representation has the formal content of an infinite substance) and so the cause of this idea must have at least as much "formal reality" as that represented.

STEP 4: Due to the meditator knows that he himself is a finite, dependent thinking being, he reasons that he could not be the ultimate cause of the idea of an infinite, supremely perfect being. Nor could a lesser (finite) cause ultimately account for that idea, because it would lack the requisite formal reality.

STEP 4: Therefore, Descartes concludes that only an infinite, supremely perfect being can have been the cause of the idea, and hence that being (God) must exist.

Then Descartes adds a related argument: he contemplates that his own existence depends on a sustaining cause (he is finite, imperfect, has limitations) and thus his existence, his very being, and the idea of perfection in him point toward a being which has within itself all perfections, and whose existence is part of its essence (though the latter step is more prominent in the Fifth Meditation). In sum, the Third Meditation argues from (i) the presence in me of the idea of a supremely perfect infinite being, (ii) the principle that a cause must at least match its effect in reality, and (iii) the recognition that I am a finite being and so cannot give myself that idea — to the conclusion that that infinite perfect being exists.

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b. The role of the Third Meditation in the Meditations as a whole

Within the broader structure of Descartes' *Meditations*, the Third Meditation plays a pivotal bridging role. In the First Meditation he engages in radical doubt (dismissing the senses, dreaming, the evil demon hypothesis) and he suspends belief in virtually all his prior knowledge. In the Second Meditation he establishes a firm foundation: he cannot doubt that he exists as a thinking thing ("I am, I exist, whenever I think"). From that vantage point he begins to reconstruct knowledge. But the door remains open: even with the cogito, how can he trust that his clear and distinct perceptions correspond to reality? That is, how can he be assured his mind is not totally deceived, or that the connection between thought and being is secure?

The Third Meditation addresses precisely that epistemological gap: how can the meditator trust his faculties, his ideas, his clear and distinct perceptions? He argues that a non-deceiving God must exist, and thus once God's existence and truthfulness are established, the meditator can accept that what he clearly and distinctly perceives is true. The Third Meditation thus serves as the foundational pivot from doubt to knowledge: it secures the guarantor of truth (God) and thereby makes possible the subsequent Meditations, in which Descartes attempts to establish the existence of the external world, the nature of material things, and mind–body distinction. In other words, the Third Meditation is the metaphysical/epistemological linchpin: without it, Descartes cannot move from self-knowledge to knowledge of the world.

Moreover, from a Catholic-scholastic perspective, one might view the Third Meditation as performing the "first" of the proofs of God's existence (in Descartes' own order) and as thereby grounding the rest of his epistemology and metaphysics. The subsequent Fourth Meditation addresses error and the will; the Fifth returns to God via an ontological argument; the Sixth deals with body and mind. Thus, the Third Meditation is the key moment where God is shown necessary for knowledge — not just for being.

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c. What sort of being does the argument mean by "God" in the Third Meditation?

In the Third Meditation, "God" is understood by Descartes to be a being whose essence includes infinite, immutable, eternal, independent, supremely powerful, supremely knowing — in his words, a "substance infinite, independent, all-knowing, all-powerful, creator of me and everything else that exists." So God for Descartes is not a mere finite substance, but the

infinite substance, which is uncaused, self-existent, and by which all else exists. God here is the cause of my existence and my ideas, the ultimate ground of being.

In Catholic scholastic terms one might say that God is conceived as ipsum esse subsistens (being itself subsisting), that is, a being whose essence is to exist and whose existence is necessary rather than contingent. Although Descartes does not adopt explicitly the full Thomistic language, the structure is analogous: God is the cause of the idea of infinity in me, thus God must be infinite; God is the sustaining cause of my being; God is a perfect being containing all perfections. In this sense, “God” is conceived as the ultimate metaphysical ground, the source of truth, being, knowledge, and the subject of no further cause. Thus in the argument God is not just “some supreme finite being,” but the absolutely infinite, necessary substance that grounds all finite reality.

It is also worth noting that Descartes treats the idea of God as innate in some sense — the idea is present in him and cannot have arisen from himself or from lesser causes. Hence God is the originator of that idea and thus must exist. In this way, the being of God in the Third Meditation is both epistemic (the source of ideas and of truth) and ontological (the source of being and existence).

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d. Why the argument does *not* succeed (where it goes wrong)

From a Catholic-philosophical (and general philosophical) perspective several serious objections have been raised to Descartes’ Third Meditation argument.

1.

First, the key premise that “I have the idea of an infinite being, and that idea must have been caused by an infinite being” is problematic. Critics note that one might form the idea of “infinite” by negating finitude (for example, by reflecting on one’s own finitude and “reaching upward” to what is unlimited). Descartes anticipates this when he argues in paragraph 29 that one cannot have formed the idea of the infinite by simply negating the finite, because one must first grasp what “infinite” is to recognize finitude as lacking it. Descartes has not satisfactorily shown that the intellect cannot abstract the idea of infinity from experience of finitude or cannot form the idea of a being “greater than any finite being” by reflection or abstracting experience.

2.

The causal adequacy principle (that the cause must contain at least as much reality as the effect) which underpins the argument — is open to challenge. The scholastic principle of causality is more nuanced: causality includes formal, efficient, and final causes, and the mapping of “objective reality of an idea” to “formal reality of its cause” is not self-evident. Thus, the move from the idea of God to the being of God via that principle is less secure than Descartes assumes. Descartes’ causal proof relies crucially on the idea of infinite objective reality, which he assumes but does not argue for.

3.

Descartes’ epistemological structure is inverted to the true metaphysical order: he begins with his own idea and then infers God’s existence, rather than starting with being and then knowledge of God. Descartes reversed the order from “what is” to “what we can know,” which undermines the metaphysical primacy of being. This inversion may undercut the philosophical credibility of the argument: the idea of God is taken as prior to demonstration of being, whereas in the Thomistic tradition one begins with the contingency of being and moves to the necessary being.

4.

The so-called “Cartesian Circle” objection undermines the epistemic role that the Third Meditation is supposed to play. The objection is that Descartes claims that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true, and yet he also claims that we can be sure of that only if God (a non-deceiver) exists. But then he uses clear and distinct perception to prove God’s existence. Hence his argument is circular. From a Catholic standpoint, the proof should not rely on epistemic assurances that in turn depend on what is being proved (God’s existence). Thus, the Third Meditation fails to deliver the epistemological guaranteed Descartes hoped for.

In short: the formal premises are either insufficiently established (the idea of the infinite, the adequacy principle), the metaphysical ordering is arguably reversed from Catholic-scholastic standards, and the circularity of the epistemic guarantee undermines the overall enterprise. Thus while the argument is ingenious, many Catholic and other philosophers judge that it does *not* succeed in a fully convincing way.